

DCRA

OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

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# DCRA CONSUMER ALERT

DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AND REGULATORY AFFAIRS · OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

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## Be Skeptical on 'Miracle' Weight Loss Drugs

Trying to get fit and trim for summer? Read labels carefully and don't believe the hype

**W**hether they're looking for a short cut to losing weight or a cure for a serious ailment, consumers may be spending billions of dollars a year on unproven, fraudulently marketed, often useless health-related products, devices and treatments. Why? Because health fraud trades on false hope. It promises quick cures and easy solutions to a variety of problems, from obesity to cancer and AIDS. But consumers who fall for fraudulent "cure-all" products don't find help or better health. Instead, they find themselves cheated out of their money, their time, and maybe even their health. Fraudulently marketed health products can keep people from seeking and getting treatment from their own healthcare professional. Some products can cause serious harm, and many are expensive because health insurance rarely covers unapproved treatments.

To avoid becoming victims of health fraud, it's important for consumers to learn how to assess health claims and seek the advice of a health professional.

### Common Health Fraud Targets

Officials at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) say health fraud promoters often target people who are overweight or have serious conditions for which there are no cures, including multiple sclerosis, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, cancer, HIV and AIDS, and arthritis.

### Assessing Claims for Dietary Supplements

The array of dietary supplements - vitamins and minerals, amino acids, enzymes, herbs, animal extracts and others - has grown tremendously over the years. Although the benefits of some of these products have been documented, the advantages of others

are unproven. For example, claims that a supplement allows you to eat all you want and lose weight effortlessly are false. To lose weight, you must lower your calorie intake or burn more calories - for example, by increasing exercise. Most medical experts recommend doing both.

Similarly, no supplement can cure arthritis or cancer in five days. Such claims are false. Consumers should be wary of any claims for a dietary supplement that say it can shrink tumors, cure insomnia, cure impotency, treat Alzheimer's disease, or prevent severe memory loss. These kinds of claims deal with the treatment of diseases, and companies that want to make such claims must follow the FDA's pre-market testing and review process required for new drugs.

### Safety Concerns

Prescription drugs must undergo clinical testing and receive the FDA's full review for safety and effectiveness before they are sold. Over-the-counter medicines are subject to the OTC drug review process, which determines safety and effectiveness of the products. Dietary supplements are not required to undergo government testing or review before they are marketed. Yet, supplements may have drug-like effects that could present risks for people on certain medicines or with certain medical conditions.

### How to Report a Potential Problem

To report a health product that you believe is being advertised falsely, contact: the FTC by phone, toll-free, at **1-877-FTC-HELP** (1-877-382-4357); TDD: 1-866-653-4261 or online at **www.ftc.gov**. Click on "**File a Complaint Online.**"

Or contact DCRA's Office of Consumer Protection, call **202-442-4400** or visit **www.dcradc.gov**.

Information from the Federal Trade Commission

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**www.dcradc.gov**

Call DCRA at (202) 442-4400 or visit us at 941 North Capitol Street NE, Washington, DC 20002.